
169th New York Infantry Newsletter

June 2012

Medal of Honor



Dear All,

Only one soldier from the 169th N.Y. was ever awarded the Medal of Honor by the U.S. Congress. Private William Henry Freeman, Co. B, orderly of Colonel Alonzo Alden, in command of a brigade during the 2^d battle of Fort Fisher, N.C., January 13-15, 1865, was honored for volunteering to carry the brigade flag after the bearer was wounded. General Alden recalled the incident in his personal memoir, published in 1896:

"Within a few moments thereafter, about five o'clock P.M., [January 15th], in compliance with the suggestion or order of General Ames, a portion of the Third Brigade, partially in self-defence, charged through the sally port into the interior of the short wing of the fort, receiving a scattering fire from the garrison, resulting in several casualties. A little circumstance occurring at this juncture was indelibly stamped upon my memory because of the bravery and gallantry involved.

"I had in my hand a substitute for the brigade headquarters flag; the color bearer had either been shot or for some reason was absent. I called for someone to take the colors. My private orderly who was with me called out, 'I will carry your colors, Colonel.' I had a just pride in my orderly, who was only 16 years old when he enlisted as a private. The young hero, William H. Freeman, takes equal pride in his narration of this crisis to his friends and companions."

Colonel Alden was nearly killed by the magazine explosion at Fort Fisher on the 16th. Witnesses described the colonel's body "flying through the air and striking the traverse of an embankment about forty feet south of where he was first discerned." His memoir continues with an account of those days in a field hospital and aboard a hospital ship during the voyage north:

"In consequence of the colonel's unconscious condition, his almost continuous delirium and the mangled state of his limb, he required the strictest surveillance on the part of his attendants, not only to avoid the aggravation of his already-serious injuries, but in their own defence against physical assault, the patient apparently believing himself to be under the restraint of his enemies. Freeman watched by the bedside of his colonel, with occasional brief respites, often finding it necessary to summon assistance whereby to control him, especially in the exercise of his unnatural strength, occasions when he would clinch his guardian with the agility and the grip of a tiger, bite or violently strike or seize him, as if struggling with his bitterest foe.

"Such was the experience that Wm. H. Freeman endured through the week's careful watching and tender care of the delirious colonel in the temporary field hospital for six days, and through nearly the two days' trip from Fort Fisher, 500 miles, to New York Harbor.

"This experience involved a brilliant example of unselfishness, loyalty and fidelity on the part of Billy Freeman to his colonel, and its expression is a more commendatory eulogium than the proudest title that could be conferred by an exalted potentate."

Recently, James B. Freeman, a great-grandson of William, and his sister, Shirley Hoffman, donated William's Medal of Honor, along with a wartime tintype photograph and other items to the Fort Fisher State Historic Site Museum at Cape Fear, N.C. This act of generosity and patriotism on their behalf is to be highly commended. Below is a report from the curator of the museum about Private Freeman and the relics which are now a part of the museum's permanent collection:

- http://www.friendsoffortfisher.com/images/Powder_Magazine_Newsletter_-_October_2011.pdf (see pp. 6-7.)

This act of bravery, exposing Private Freeman to great personal danger, was recognized by Congress only six years before William's passing in 1911. According to an article in the *Troy Daily Times*, July 6, 1865, ten different color-bearers from the 169th N.Y. were killed or wounded while bearing the regiment's colors during the war. The Medal of Honor is the highest military decoration awarded by the United States government.

FOUND! Memorial Stained Glass Window of the 169th N.Y.

After a diligent 3-month research effort by Bill Connelly, Kevin Franklin (Historian of the Town of Colonie, N.Y.), Jay VanDervoort (a direct descendent of Captain Henry M. Clum, 125th N.Y.), and this writer, the memorial stained glass window of the 169th N.Y. has been found. It is in the possession of Louis and Lori Desorbo of Schenectady, N.Y., who acquired the memorial window and another stained glass window from the former St. Margaret's Episcopal Church in Menands, N.Y., shortly after the building was sold to a non-denominational Christian organization in 1984.

Lori reports that they intend to repair two small holes in the memorial window before permitting any photographs to be taken of this important historical object. Below is an article from the *Albany Times Union* reporting the exciting discovery:

- Times Union article: <http://www.timesunion.com/default/article/Search-for-historic-window-sees-light-3530452.php>
- Hardcopy article: <http://www.mediafire.com/?5yff1tuw850dy4c>

It is my hope to be able to use a photograph of the window on the back cover of the history of the 169th N.Y. My thanks go out to the team for their tireless efforts and extraordinary creativity in identifying research avenues to pursue. I would also like to thank several stained glass window experts for their advice, in particular Nigel D. Johnson, president of Cohoes Design Glass Associates, Inc., of Schenectady.



I am saddened to report the passing of my friend and co-researcher of the 169th N.Y., William ("Bill") J. Connelly, who died suddenly on May 22 at the age of 61. Bill served as a captain in the New York Air National Guard and flew recon and attack helicopters during his 16-year military career before joining GE (later Momentive Performance Materials) in Waterford, N.Y. He leaves behind his wife Donna and two sons. His love of Ireland was reflected through his music...

<http://www.saintjamesgate.com/themusic.htm>

I will miss Bill's friendship, good cheer, and patriotism. This edition of the 169th N.Y. Infantry newsletter is dedicated to his memory.

Best regards,

- Steve Wiezbicki

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